Why Am I Reading This?

In a world changing at an incredibly rapid rate, in which reading itself seems threatened, books which have stimulated and sustained readers for decades are in danger of being lost in the buzz of our audio-video, sound-bite, multi-media culture. Many readers today doubt that writers from the past have anything to say to the fast-moving present.

We believe that the great "classic" American writers still have a great deal to say, some of them more now than when they were written. This Let's Talk About It series aims to give these older writers an opportunity to present their message today. Our method is to approach these classic texts from two opposite but mutually reinforcing points of view: as stories of individuals and as stories of culture.

Book List

1. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, by Mark Twain (1884)
2. The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway, by Ernest Hemingway (1923-1938)
3. Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems, by Emily Dickson (1858-1955)
4. The Grapes of Wrath, by John Steinbeck (1939)
5. The Great Gatsby, by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)
6. Little Women, by Louisa May Alcott (1868)
7. The Old Man and the Sea, by Ernest Hemingway (1952)
8. Pudd'nhead Wilson, by Mark Twain (1894)
9. Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston (1937)
10. Walden; or, Life in the Woods, by Henry David Thoreau (1854)
11. The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, by L. Frank Baum (1900)

Book Summaries

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

This is arguably Mark Twain's greatest book, partly because it is held together by his greatest character, the narrator Huck, and partly because it criticizes the cruelties and hypocrisies of American culture so powerfully. The novel condemns the various ways in which human beings gain advantage for themselves at the expense of others. Religion, social position, fraud, mob violence: all these are described; but the extreme example of cruelty and taking advantage of others is, of course, slavery. At the book's core is Huck's relation to the slave Jim, and much of the novel's brilliant irony comes from Huck's condemning himself for the same feelings and actions toward Jim which readers (and the author) applaud and love him for. It is also a very funny book. Whatever the target of his criticism, Twain can make us laugh, even when despair is behind the humor.

Author Information

A scathing critic of American culture, Mark Twain was no less hard on himself. "Well," he wrote to a friend, "I am a great and sublime fool. But then I am God's fool, and all His works must be contemplated with respect." Twain was a "character" not only in the flamboyance of his personality and his matchless wit, but also in the conflicts that drove his personality. These conflicts are indicated by the continuing competition between his two names: Samuel L. Clemens and Mark Twain, which still give librarians and indexers fits trying to decide what to call him. The values and allegiances of Clemens/Twain were typically divided. He wanted to thumb his nose at society, but also to be successful in it. He wanted to be the writer of democracy, of the people, but he also wanted the upper-class culture of the East coast to accept him. Even his writing style changed, according to his sense of purpose and audience.

Discussion Questions for Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

1. Twain begins his novel with two short statements, a “Notice” threatening death to anyone who would treat his story as serious literature and an “Explanatory” note describing the care he has taken with the various dialects in the novel. What seems to be the purpose of these two, almost contradictory, signals to the reader? What conditions do they impose on the reader?
2. At the end of the novel, Jim reveals to Huck that the dead man found in the floating house was Huck’s father. What reasons might Jim have for not revealing this fact to Huck at the time it was discovered?
3. Although the setting for the novel is just prior to the Civil War, Twain wrote the book after the war. How does the novel describe the various social and historical forces leading to the war?
4. Some readers regard Huck’s apology to Jim in chapter 15 as the turning point in the novel. What does Huck come to understand at this point, and how does it shape his attitude throughout the rest of the book?
5. The sunken river boat in chapters 12 and 13 is named the Walter Scott. Why do you think Twain gave the boat that name?
6. Does Colonel Sherburn’s denunciation of the mob represent Twain’s opinion of people in general? If so, does this justify Sherburn’s killing of Boggs?
7. The central symbol of the novel is the river. Discuss how the river functions as a structuring principle for the novel, what the river represents, and how it both facilitates and frustrates Huck’s escape to freedom.
8. What are we to make of the fact that, at the end of the novel, Tom gives Jim forty dollars for the inconvenience he endured while in prison? What further is to be made of the fact that Jim “was pleased most to death” by Tom’s generosity?
9. What, if anything, has Huck learned from his adventures?
10. At various points in recent history, Twain’s novel has been banned. The reasons for this vary, ranging from Huck’s poor manner and unsanitary habits to the portrayal of racist language and attitudes. Discuss how and why this book makes some people uncomfortable and whether or not there is any justification for withholding it from young people.
11. List the various names and identities that Huck takes on during the course of the novel. Why do you suppose he has so many?

The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway

Hemingway's personality threatens to overshadow his writing, but it is always refreshing to return to his fictional creations. He did his best work in the short stories. These stories, written in the 1920s and 1930s when Hemingway was in the prime of his life and career, will take you to Michigan and Chicago, Spain and Africa. More important, they will take you into the minds of some of Hemingway's most powerful characters, most of them American. Hemingway's stories often portray a desperate, tenacious love of life, though many seem preoccupied, as Hemingway was himself, with death.

Author Information

Hemingway did not come easily to his famous terse style. Though he read widely and composed stories in high school, his prose apprenticeship took him a long time. He turned down a chance to go to college to become a cub reporter for the Kansas City Star. He left that job to serve in Italy in the First World War as an ambulance driver. Wounded, he returned home in 1919 and continued writing. As a reporter for the Star, he began to learn a thrifty, blunt style. In Europe in the 1920s he worked as a correspondent for the Toronto Star, writing human-interest accounts that helped him sharpen his skills of observation and set them in succinct prose. In Paris in the twenties, Hemingway became a member of Gertrude Stein's "lost generation." Stein and Ezra Pound tutored Hemingway; F. Scott Fitzgerald was a friend. Between 1923 and 1938 he published forty-nine short stories which are among the best any American has produced.

Discussion Questions for The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway

1. Appraise your preconceptions of Hemingway. To what degree do you think your notions of the man colored your views of the fiction? As you turned (or returned) to the short stories and tried to divorce past judgments or prejudices from present reading, what did you discover?
2. In "*The Art of the Short Story*" Hemingway said, "A few things I have found to be true. If you leave out important things or events that you know about, the story is strengthened. If you leave out or skip something because you do not know it, the story will be worthless. The test of any story is how very good the stuff is that you, not your editors, omit." As you read Hemingway's short stories, what has he left out? Why has he included what he has included? Do you always agree with his choices?
3. One critic has suggested that "every Hemingway story is tragic." Do you find a sense of inevitable doom in all of the stories? Is there any qualifying or mitigating force in the presence of unkind fate?
4. Hemingway has been described as a rustic moralist, a non-intellectual reporter known for his practicality and resilience. What morals does he argue for, stand for? Is his a morality of mere survival, or is there something more?
5. One critic has pointed out that Hemingway's virile writing masks an aesthetic sensibility of great delicacy. Explore instances in Hemingway's short fiction where potent, brawny themes and style are juxtaposed with exquisite, sensitive themes and style.
6. Hemingway's stories are often seen as tales of initiation. The symbolic journey includes trials and helpers, flights and returns. Do you see Hemingway's characters completing the symbolic journey with a knowledge or power they lacked at the outset?
7. Discuss the role of physical action in Hemingway's short fiction. One critic has asserted that "physical action is unimportant insofar as the actions reveal the psychological underpinnings of the story." Do you agree that psychology is more important than action in the stories?
8. One critic points out that Hemingway was extremely dependent on women throughout his life and that dependence stems directly from his "androgynous" parents who gave him a "conflicting definition of manhood" to live with. From the short fiction, try to reconstruct the complexity of Hemingway's view of manhood and the relationship of the sexes.
9. One critic suggests that "none of Hemingway's characters is definite" because Hemingway himself is anxious about being misidentified and projects that anxiety onto every character. Thus, a character like Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is both an altruistic political martyr and a suicidal coward. What protagonists in Hemingway's short fiction illustrate this complexity?
10. Is "*The Killers"* Nick Adams' story or is it Ole Anderson's?
11. "*The Snows of Kilimanjaro"* contains two prominent symbols—the mountain and the leopard frozen on it. How do they function in the story? Does Harry come to an understanding of himself at the end of the story? How do these symbols help answer the previous question?

Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems

Emily Dickinson lived in Puritan New England in the days of that culture's decline. Her poems often show outrage at the rigid social conventions of her culture. Dickinson is a poet of social and religious criticism, but, probably more important, she is a poet of individual feeling: of love and loneliness, expectation and renunciation, death and its effect on the living. And she wrote wonderful poems of delight at being alive in the world of nature and of people. After her death, her sister became obsessed with having her poetry published. In a gift to a friend, Emily once enclosed a note that said merely, "Area—no Test of Depth." That might serve as a comment on Emily Dickinson and her writing. If Thoreau is generous, even careless with words, Dickinson is parsimonious. Words mattered greatly to her. Readers are often left feeling very ambiguous about her poetry: they can't understand her very well, but they are sure that she is a superior artist; and they agree that although she is frustratingly cryptic at times, she nevertheless meets some deep need in them.

Author Information

Emily Dickinson was born to Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830. Though Emily's formal education was limited, it was excellent. She attended Amherst Academy from 1840 to 1847, and spent 1847-48 at Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary. One intriguing aspect of Dickinson's character is her reclusiveness. The only known photograph of Dickinson shows that she, like her mother and sister, was slightly wall-eyed. The frightening eye disease may have been severe enough to threaten blindness, and after she returned home from the treatments, she became increasingly more reclusive. Emily Dickinson's use of language is one of her major contributions to American literature. She used quite ordinary poetic forms—the rhythms common to English hymns. The ordinariness of the forms is reflected in the well-known contention that people can sing most of her poems to the tune of "The Yellow Rose of Texas." But in those forms she condensed meaning and created riddling ellipses, thereby inventing a new means of poetic expression.

Discussion Questions for Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems

1. Emily Dickinson experienced death close at hand many times in her life. In fact, it was common for the women during the 1800s to sit in "watches" with dying friends and relatives. Her father, her mother, her nephew, Bowles, Wadsworth, Lord, Helen Hunt Jackson, all died in the last few years of Emily's life. Furthermore, she experienced many separations from friends and family over the years. Therefore, it is not surprising that the theme of loss would appear in several of her poems. Discuss this theme as you see it dealt with in her poetry.
2. The varied opinions about Emily Dickinson as a character are often based on her varied "voices" in her poems. She may appear to be a child, reveling in the wonders of nature; or a lover, caught up in passionate thought; or a bitter, even defiant questioner of God and his dealings with humankind; or a pessimistic commentator on death; or a poet describing her art. Which "voices" do you hear in her poetry? How does she vary those voices in speaking to you?
3. Admittedly, many of her poems are difficult to understand. Can you put your finger on just what makes them so tough to decipher? What strategies have you used in trying to understand them? Discuss these with the other members of your discussion group.
4. According to her sister, Emily Dickinson's retirement from society was "only a happen." That is, it was a slow process, the result not of a sudden decision, but of many small, separate decisions. Nonetheless, she never did marry nor have children. Consequently, her only "descendants" are her readers. Now, over a century after her death, how do you—as her descendant/reader—respond to her writing? Do you feel that she is speaking directly to you? Or not? How does she create this effect on you?
5. One of her most famous poems is #172, "This is my letter to the World/That never wrote to Me--." Now we all have a chance to write to Emily Dickinson. What would you say in a letter to her?
6. One critic maintains that three of the strongest currents of mid-nineteenth century New England "came to a confluence in her poetry: The Puritan tradition in which she was nurtured; the Yankee or, more broadly, American humor that was just coming out of the ground; and the spiritual unrest…which was everywhere melting the frost of custom." Where—if anywhere—in the poems you have read do you see evidence of these currents?
7. In another of her poems, #270, Dickinson begins "I dwell in Possibility--/A fairer House than Prose--." As we seek to discover what her poems mean, we might consider that she is just "dwelling in Possibility," perhaps more thinking out loud, examining an idea, than she is asserting anything in particular. Do you see this as a way to approach her poems? With which poems might this approach work?
8. Obviously, words were important to Emily Dickinson. She referred to them as "Playmates" and commented on their "lovely wiles," yet they were "mighty." They were indeed her source of power—the power to create. And it is her words that have assured her immortality. Discuss your own reactions to her choice of words in any one poem.

9. The poems on the reading are arranged not only numerically but also chronologically. Emily did not actually date all of her poems and drafts, but Thomas H. Johnson added the dates based on his research: he noted that her handwriting changed from year to year; he traced those variations in her letters, which were dated; then he matched the letters with the poems. In some cases, poems were included in the letters, so they were easy to date. Given that this may not be a foolproof method, can you see any contrasts in the approaches to subjects that Dickinson makes over the years? For instance, does her attitude toward death change as you progress through the poems? How about her comments on nature? Other topics?
10. Do you think that Emily Dickinson's works are an expression of a life lived or a life repressed? Explain.

The Grapes of Wrath

This is the story of a desperate people, moving westward in the hope of a better life. It is at once a naturalistic epic, a dissenting tract, and a romantic gospel. It speaks to a multiplicity of human experiences and is located squarely in our national consciousness. Convinced that things *must* be better in California than they were at the time in Oklahoma, dust bowl migrants were drawn westward by luxurious visions. The reality was far different from what they had dreamed, and what they found was poverty, exploitation, and powerlessness. Instead of sweet California grapes, they found bitter grapes of resentment and anger.

Author Information

John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in the California farming town of Salinas. After attending Stanford University for six years (and failing to complete the requirements for a degree), he went to New York City where he worked as a construction laborer and reporter. His first novel *Cup of Gold* (1929) was published after his return to California. It was a fanciful tale of allegory and romance based on the life of Henry Morgan, the pirate-governor of Jamaica. The novel was not a great success, and Steinbeck soon turned to the materials he knew best, the people and places of his native California. In the 1930's, Steinbeck published a series of novels, each set in California's central coast and valleys, which achieved wide recognition. *The Pastures of Heaven, The Red Pony, Tortilla Flat, In Dubious Battle,* and *Of Mice and Men* are among Steinbeck's greatest achievements. During these early years, Steinbeck also continued to work as a reporter, investigating among other things, the conditions of migratory farm laborers in California. He summarized his conclusions in a series of articles first published as "The Harvest of Gypsies" in the San Francisco News in October 1936, and later reprinted as a pamphlet under the title *Their Blood is Strong*. Steinbeck completed his fictional account of the Dust Bowl migrants during a burst of activity between June and October of 1938, and the novel stands as a masterpiece of world literature.

Discussion Questions for The Grapes of Wrath

1. The structure of *The Grapes of Wrath* includes narrative or "storytelling" chapters as well as brief and more poetic interchapters. Why do you think Steinbeck used this structure? What seems to be the purpose of the interchapters?
2. An important thematic element in the book is the tragic discrepancy between the myth and reality of California. What visions do the characters have of a better life in this Promised Land? How do the realities of California live up to these expectations?
3. Steinbeck once wrote that he intended to "rip" his readers' nerves "to rags" by making them "participate in the actuality" of his characters' lives. How well does Steinbeck achieve this intention? Cite specific examples to support your answer?
4. Discuss the origins and expression of the anti-Okie mentality. What kinds of discrimination do the Joads and the other Dust Bowl migrants encounter?
5. Discuss Steinbeck's treatment of poverty. What changes does poverty affect in the personalities, family structure, and values of the characters?
6. What are the elements of Steinbeck's critique of the American political and economic system? What sort of revolution does Steinbeck seem to be forecasting? Discuss the radicalization of his characters?
7. Analyze Steinbeck's development of the theme of unity. Does his vision of unity extend to all mankind (including the California farmers and cops) or is it exclusively a class unity?
8. Some critics have suggested that the key meaning of the book lies in its Biblical and Christian symbolism. Do you agree with this interpretation? Why or why not?
9. When the novel was published in 1939, it was banned in communities in California and elsewhere as "obscene" and as "propaganda." Why do you think the novel provoked such a negative reaction? Why would some people want to see the novel suppressed?
10. From what you know of the conditions of migratory farm workers in California and the west today, how have conditions changed in the fifty years since *The Grapes of Wrath* was published? If you were to write a novel today about the migrants, what themes would you include?

The Great Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald chronicled the decadence and excess of the Jazz Age in this story of the quest for the American Dream by self-made millionaire Jay Gatsby. Both Gatsby and the narrator of Gatsby's story, Nick Carroway, are combat veterans of World War I, having fought as young infantry officers on the Western Front. The drunken, gaudy parties that the mysterious Jay Gatsby throws every weekend at his palatial mansion on Long Island become a metaphor and a sign of the larger disorder produced by that war, which seriously damaged, if it did not entirely destroy, the moral foundations upon which Western civilization had rested. Gatsby pursues his love, Daisy Buchanan, who remains beyond his reach despite the wealth that Gatsby has amassed.

Author Information

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born September 24, 1896, in St. Paul, Minnesota. He was one of the best known American authors of the 1920s and '30s and is closely associated with the optimism and excesses of that era's "Jazz Age." Fitzgerald's stories often featured people like himself: middle-American types infatuated with the wealth and status of upper-crust society. In the mid-1920s he lived in Paris where he was friends with Ernest Hemingway and other literary expatriates. Fitzgerald was a popular celebrity of the day, and he and his wife, Zelda, became famous for their extravagant lifestyle, drinking bouts and (eventually) erratic behavior. His major published novels include *This Side of Paradise* (1920), *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and *Tender Is the Night* (1934). Fitzgerald was named for his distant cousin, Francis Scott Key, the composer of the American National Anthem. Fitzgerald died December 21, 1940, of a heart attack.

Discussion Questions for The Great Gatsby

1. How does the use of a narrator (instead of the usual omniscient authorial voice) affect our feelings about Gatsby?
2. What symbolic gestures by Gatsby convey his character to us?
3. Why is "Owl Eyes" an important minor character?
4. What is Fitzgerald trying to represent by creating "the Valley of Ashes"?
5. What pattern regarding the driving of automobiles is evident in this novel, and what does the pattern convey to you?
6. Why does Nick Carroway change his mind about Gatsby?
7. In what way do the Midwest, West Egg, and the United States represent something generally opposed to what New York, East Egg and Europe stand for?
8. How are "success" and "failure" represented in this novel? How is poverty represented in relation to wealth?
9. What is Fitzgerald saying in this novel about the decline of religious faith in the past-war period? How is this expressed?
10. In what ways are all of the characters in this novel, even Tom Buchanan, to be pitied?
11. Why is the East "haunted" for Nick? Why does he return home? What does the West represent to him?
12. What would you say is the general representation of the American character in this novel?
13. What does Nick's presentation of a list of Gatsby's guests add to the novel?
14. How does Myer Wolfsheim figure in the story? And Jordan Baker? Why are they both connected with popular American sports?
15. Consider the various details that represent American attitudes toward Europe. Why is it apparently important to Fitzgerald that such attitudes be represented?
16. What are the most important instances in the novel of a breakdown of moral order?

Little Women

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott (1868) is an enduring book that yields some startling insights into nineteenth century American life when one reads it as an adult. The novel has never been out of print since its initial publication in 1868, and it has been translated into no less than 27 languages. How to account for such longstanding appeal? Jo, in her feisty rebellion against the shackles of girlhood, is a character with whom all readers, especially girls, can identify. The novel raises still-valid questions about options and roles for women and also demonstrates the strides toward quality women have achieved in the past century. The novel was an instant success and became the precursor of the realistic family novel. (Source: Theme pamphlet by Elizabeth R. Baer, for American Library Association, 1984.)

Author Information

Alcott, born into a New England family, was the second daughter of Bronson Alcott, a transcendentalist visionary and educator, and Abigail May Alcott, who bore the primary responsibility for keeping the family clothed and sheltered. Encouraged by Bronson, each member of the family regularly kept a journal and worked on self-improvement, just as the members of the fictional family do. Alcott approached the writing of a "girl's story" at the urging of her father and her publisher, with a certain amount of resignation as she would have preferred to make her reputation with adult fiction. She had published books ranging from one on her Civil War nursing experiences to a fictionalized autobiography. However, given the urgent need of her family for financial assistance, she penned the first half of what is now published as one novel (the sequel came out in 1869) within three months' time. According to family legend, she trained herself to write with both hands so that she could switch when one hand grew tired!

Discussion Questions for Little Women

1. Which character do you most closely identify with and why?
2. Does this book have appeal to modern teens? What are the enduring qualities of the book?
3. If you read this book as a child, how do you relate differently to it as an adult? Share a personal experience of reading the book as a child.
4. What makes this book memorable to you? Would you recommend it to someone to read?
5. There are a number of themes running throughout the book, some of which seem to be relevant for children and other relevant for adults. What are some of the themes that seem of most interest to children? To adults?
6. How does the relative absence of the father seem to affect the girls' behavior and their feelings toward him? Does the relationship between daughters and father seem similar to other father-daughter relationships you have seen? How does his absence affect the development of Jo's relationship with others?
7. Discuss the following characters as to their true-to-life characteristics and their impact on the story: Meg, Beth, Amy, Laurie, Aunt March, Mr. Lawrence, Marmee, Jo.
8. Discuss the enduring qualities of this book. Many scholars and readers think that this book has little appeal to modern adolescents. What do you think?
9. The manners, dress, means of transportation, whole way of life depicted in this book belong to another time. Have we totally lost the "gentility" this family exudes? Which aspects of their lives would benefit us and our children today?
10. Was Jo right to turn down Laurie's proposal? How would a twentieth century teenager have reacted?
11. How do you relate now, as an adult, to this book? What are the differences in your response to the book? Do you read it as a parent with your own children in mind, as a wife, as an interested adult or for the purpose of re-experiencing your own childhood?

The Old Man and the Sea

The Old Man and the Sea invites, even demands, reading on multiple levels. For example, readers can receive the novella as an engaging and realistic story of Santiago, the old man; Manolin, the young man who loves him; and Santiago's last and greatest battle with a giant marlin. However, the novella also clearly fits into the category of *allegory* — a story with a surface meaning and one or more under-the-surface meanings. Likewise, the characters become much more than themselves or even types — they become *archetypes* (universal representations inherited from the collective consciousness of our ancestors and the fundamental facts of human existence). From this perspective, Santiago is mentor, spiritual father, old man, or old age; and Manolin is pupil, son, boy, or youth. Santiago is the great fisherman and Manolin his apprentice — both dedicated to fishing as a way of life that they were born to and a calling that is spiritually enriching and part of the organic whole of the natural world. Santiago, as the greatest of such fishermen and the embodiment of their philosophy, becomes a solitary human representative to the natural world. He accepts the inevitability of the natural order, in which all creatures are both predator and prey, but recognizes that all creatures also nourish one another. He accepts the natural cycle of human existence as part of that natural order, but finds within himself the imagination and inspiration to endure his greatest struggle and achieve the intangibles that can redeem his individual life so that even when destroyed he can remain undefeated.

Author Information

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), born in Oak Park, Illinois, started his career as a writer in a newspaper office in Kansas City at the age of seventeen. After the United States entered the First World War, he joined a volunteer ambulance unit in the Italian army. Serving at the front, he was wounded, was decorated by the Italian Government, and spent considerable time in hospitals. After his return to the United States, he became a reporter for Canadian and American newspapers and was soon sent back to Europe to cover such events as the Greek Revolution. During the twenties, Hemingway became a member of the group of expatriate Americans in Paris, which he described in his first important work, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Equally successful was *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), the study of an American ambulance officer's disillusionment in the war and his role as a deserter. Hemingway used his experiences as a reporter during the civil war in Spain as the background for his most ambitious novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). Among his later works, the most outstanding is the short novel, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). His straightforward prose, his spare dialogue, and his predilection for understatement are particularly effective in his short stories, some of which are collected in *Men Without Women* (1927) and *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories* (1938). Hemingway died in Idaho in 1961.

Discussion Questions for The Old man and the Sea

1. Is this really about an old man and the sea? Or is it about an old man and a fish? Or about an old man and a young boy? Or maybe these are all bound up together. Certainly, the sea and the fish dominate the old man's attention for most of the tale, yet he also says that he likes to go out alone "beyond all the people in the world," but he wishes he had the boy with him. He says, "I told the boy I was a strange old man . . . Now is when I must prove it." What *is* he trying to prove?

2. Speaking of the fish, he says, "He is my brother, but I must kill him." He claims to love the fish, yet he will kill it. Why does this fish mean so much to him? How are they alike? Do you see any parallels between the old man's quest for the fish and Ahab's search for Moby Dick? How are they similar, and how are they different?

3. At one point the old man compares himself to Joe DiMaggio. At another, he recalls an arm wrestling match with a Negro. What's the point? Is this just an instance of an old guy trying to prove his manhood to himself and a young boy? Or is it some sort of spiritual quest? Or possibly both? What if he hadn't caught the fish? Would he have considered himself a failure?

4. During the shark attack, he feels regret about the way things have turned out, but reflects, ""Do not think about sin . . . There are enough problems without sin. Also, I have no understanding of it," and "You killed him for pride and because you are a fisherman." To what extent could this internal conversation be seen as a meditation on killing?

5. Although for much of the book, not much happens, the old man is an acute observer of nature. He notices many details of water, lines, birds, clouds, and sea life. Even his thoughts seem to be concrete and image based, rather than abstract and philosophical. The sentences are mostly short and straightforward, the vocabulary lean and spare. The main characters don't even have names. Did you find this narrative style effective? Did it hold your attention throughout?

6. A man, a boy, and a fish, which also appears to be male -- this would certainly appear to be a masculine story, perhaps one that says something about a distinctly male way of being in the world, one that is being passed down from generation to generation. What are the characteristics of this ethos? Is it exclusively masculine, or is it something that women can also relate to?

Pudd’nhead Wilson

At the beginning of Pudd'nhead Wilson a young slave woman, fearing for her infant son's life, exchanges her light-skinned child with her master's. From this rather simple premise Mark Twain fashioned one of his most entertaining, funny, yet biting novels. On its surface, Pudd'nhead Wilson possesses all the elements of an engrossing nineteenth-century mystery: reversed identities; a horrible crime; an eccentric detective; a suspenseful courtroom drama; and a surprising, unusual solution. Yet it is not a mystery novel. Seething with the undercurrents of antebellum southern culture, the book is a savage indictment in which the real criminal is society, and racial prejudice and slavery are the crimes. Written in 1894, Pudd'nhead Wilson glistens with characteristic Twain humor, with suspense, and with pointed irony: a gem among the author's later works.

About the Author

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born November 30, 1835, the sixth child of John Marshall and Jane Lampton Clemens. Approximately four years after his birth the Clemens family moved to the town of Hannibal. As a youngster, Samuel was kept indoors because of poor health. However, by age nine, he seemed to recover from his ailments and joined the rest of the town's children outside. When Samuel was 12, his father died of pneumonia, and at 13, Samuel left school to become a printer's apprentice. After two short years, he joined his brother Orion's newspaper as a printer and editorial assistant. It was here that young Samuel found he enjoyed writing. At 17, he left Hannibal behind for a printer's job in St. Louis. While in St. Louis, Clemens became a river pilot's apprentice. He became a licensed river pilot in 1858. Clemens' pseudonym, Mark Twain, comes from his days as a river pilot. It is a river term which means two fathoms or 12-feet when the depth of water for a boat is being sounded. "Mark twain" means that is safe to navigate. Clemens began working as a newspaper reporter for several newspapers all over the United States. In 1870, Clemens married Olivia Langdon, and they had four children. Twain began to gain fame when his story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calavaras County" appeared in the New York Saturday Press on November 18, 1865. Twain's first book, "The Innocents Abroad," was published in 1869, "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" in 1876, and "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" in 1885. Mark Twain passed away on April 21, 1910, but has a following still today. His childhood home is open to the public as a museum in Hannibal.

Discussion Questions for Pudd'nhead Wilson

1. Twain wrote often about pairs and opposites, like Huck and Jim, the King and the Duke, the Prince and the Pauper, etc. How do we understand the characters of Tom and Chambers better for having them paired?

2. Do you sympathize with Roxy? Why or why not? Does your sympathy remain constant throughout the novel?

3. Which part of this novel is most compelling to read? Why?

4. What do you learn about Mark Twain's views of race and slavery from this novel?

5. Does nature or nurture account for the dispositions of the two boys? How sure are you? How do you know? Why is your certainty or lack of certainty on this question important to a novel that concerns itself, among other things, with the morality of race-based slavery?

6. Why is the novel named for Pudd'nhead Wilson instead of Roxy or the boys? Does the novel change meaning as we shift attention from one of these characters to another?

7. Early in his career in short fiction, Twain parodied the schoolchild's lesson that Virtue earns a reward and Vice earns punishment. Is Virtue rewarded in this story? Is Vice punished? Are you satisfied with the story's moral outcome?

8. What does this story satirize?

9. Like the better-known and earlier Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Pudd'nhead Wilson is set before the Civil War but written and published a generation later. Why does Twain revisit the pre-war Mississippi River in this novel? What does the novel have to say to Americans thirty years after the war? Or today?

Their Eyes Were Watching God

This is a novel which tells the story of Janie Crawford's search for freedom and fulfillment through her participation in black culture. It is as important that Janie is a woman as it is that she is black; the combination of these two qualities made *Their Eyes Were Watching God* a groundbreaking novel. Author Zora Neale Hurston was a member of the Harlem Renaissance and spent her entire life struggling to keep her people's cultural heritage alive. Written in Haiti while the author was doing field work, this novel "embalmed" all her passion for her recently abandoned lover. More importantly, the work combines two central themes from Hurston's life: her search for independence and fulfillment and her love for black folk culture.

Author Information

Hurston tells readers in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road,* simply that she did "get born." She grew up in Eatonville, Florida, the only incorporated all black town in the U.S. Her mother fought to give her the freedom to "look white folks right in the face" and set out for the horizon; she never discouraged Hurston's storytelling and inventiveness. After a long struggle to educate herself, Hurston graduated from Barnard College in anthropology, and black folk culture became her vocation. Working under the supervision of noted anthropologist Franz Boas, Hurston set off to collect black folk tales in southern timber camps, jook joints, and store porches, and to study voodoo in New Orleans and Haiti.

Discussion Questions for Their Eyes Were Watching God

1. Early in the novel, Janie experiences a moment of awakening while lying under a pear tree. Versions of that pear tree image form an important motif in the novel. What does the image mean? What uses does Hurston make of the image in other parts of the novel?
2. Hurston incorporates a number of folk tales into *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. What function does this folk material serve in the novel?
3. The novel presents and tests at least three different understandings of marriage. Explain these different understandings. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each?
4. One critic has argued that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has an "awkward" structure because Janie is forced to narrate to Phoebe events with which Phoebe must already be familiar. Is the structure of the novel a problem? What positive purpose does Janie's narrating events with which Phoebe must already be familiar serve in the novel?
5. How does the language of the narrator reflect a growing sense of intimacy with Janie?
6. Janie's ability to become a full participant in black folk culture makes it possible for her to find the freedom she seeks. In what ways does the folk culture help Janie succeed in her search?
7. Hurston's novel fails to confront explicitly the problem of black/white relations. Yet Hurston dramatizes the many ways in which racial tensions surface within the black community. What evidence of this racial tension do you find? What were the reasons for these tensions? How does Hurston's treatment of prejudices among blacks contribute to the theme of the novel? In what ways do white/black relations enter the novel?
8. Alice Walker has observed that one of Hurston's most attractive features is her "racial health—a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings." From your reading of this novel, how do you understand Hurston's attitude toward race?
9. For some years now, this novel has been growing in popularity. What features of the work, in your opinion, have made this novel an enduring classic? What about the novel makes it appeal to readers today?
10. Traditionally, readers think of works by men when they think of American classics. Might there also be a distinctly female American classic? Although Hurston and Dickinson come from different times and very different cultures, do they share a female perspective that sets them apart from the male writers you have read so far? How would you characterize that female perspective, if you see one?

Walden; or, Life in the Woods

Walden is a difficult book. It is full of outrageous exaggerations and teasing paradoxes. Thoreau loves words, uses them beautifully, but at times loves their twists and turns excessively and uses too many of them, in paragraphs that threaten never to end. His philosophical reflections often begin clearly but end in unresolved complexity, and a little later he may turn around and express an opposing view. (“A foolish consistency,” wrote his friend and mentor Emerson, “is the hobgoblin of little minds.”) Thoreau’s descriptions of ponds and woods, beans and woodchucks, ice and rain, winter and spring, are vivid but may go on too long and lose some of their effect. Add to these qualities Thoreau’s controversial opinions and ways of living, and it’s easy to see why readers so often get furious with him. He challenges our ways of living, so of course he makes us mad. But because he confronts us at the core of our lives—our goals and our relations to others, society, nature, and God—people keep reading him. We don’t ignore him because he highlights certain areas of our lives whose importance has only increased since he died in 1862.

Author Information

Henry David Thoreau decided that he could see life and the world more clearly if he lived by himself for a while, so he stayed two years by the shore of Walden Pond, a few miles from his hometown, Concord, Massachusetts. He wanted to test his idea that the key to living a full life is to simplify it: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." Thoreau is certainly a “character”—the kind that will never win a popularity contest. His faults and the thorny aspects of his personality leave him vulnerable to criticism by those who dislike his character, ideas, or lifestyle. However, Jon Margolis wrote that “Thoreau was a decent, educated, hard-working person, and no one who writes can be anything but awed by the way he did it.”

Discussion Questions for Walden, or, Life in the Woods

1. Consider what you knew and thought about Thoreau and his Walden experiment before starting your reading for this "Let's Talk About It" session. What were your ideas, attitudes, and images relating to Thoreau and "Walden"?
2. And now, after your reading, how have these ideas, attitudes, and images changed?
3. What is Thoreau saying in "Economy" about the "necessaries" of life, those things that we need to have? What are those necessary things? And what happens after one gets them? What is the next step?
4. Thoreau is a very funny writer, although you have to be alert to his kind of humor to get it. He loves word play, such as using the same word in different contexts which change the meaning. (For example, "It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or to the county jail." He also loves humorous comparisons, of animals to people, for example, or of his life to the lives of others. Thoreau enjoys making fun of people and social groups, nor does he spare himself. Of course, there is always a serious point lurking somewhere nearby; for example, his playful account of his "enterprises" and "business" is also a satire on the business goals that drive most Americans. His playful description in the "The Bean Field" of the sounds of the Concord guns sharply attacks the Mexican War. What other examples of word play, satire, humorous description, or other forms of humor do you find?
5. What do you think of Thoreau's economics? For one thing, he regrets the division of labor which makes specialists of people and narrows their abilities and sense of life's wholeness. For another, he says that "the cost of thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it." Acting on this principle, he decides that it is cheaper for him to walk 30 miles than to spend the time to earn the money to buy a ticket to take the train the same distance. He also considers that buying a house is a waste. Is such thinking applicable in our time?
6. Do you think Thoreau misrepresents his situation at Walden Pond by not mentioning that he built his cabin, with Ralph Waldo Emerson's permission, on Emerson's land?
7. Why does Thoreau make so much of the images of dawn, sunrise, and morning? What attitudes do they carry?
8. There are many, many passages that we could profitably examine in detail, though we might not agree on what they mean. One such rather notorious passage occurs at the end of "Spring": Thoreau's reflections on a dead horse. What do you make of this passage? What is Thoreau trying to say? Do you agree with him?
9. Find a similar passage of your own, an interesting one, preferably controversial or unclear to you. Find out if the other members of the discussion group interpret it the same way you do.
10. Imagine that you met Henry Thoreau some time after the publication of *Walden*. What would you want to ask him? What would you want to tell him? If you want, bring him into the present and tell him how the world has and has not changed since his time.

11. In your own words, how does Thoreau explain his reasons for going to Walden, and for leaving it? How does he justify his experiment? He seems to think it was successful enough. Do you agree?

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

Since it first appeared in 1900, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has brought joy to generations. In it, a girl's dream world comes to life as the cyclone lifts Dorothy from Kansas, depositing her in the enchanted land of the Munchkins. Here she meets the famous Oz characters: the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodsman, the Cowardly Lion, and the Wicked Witch of the West. Her adventures along the Yellow Brick Road to the Emerald City and the Wizard himself evoke the rich, universal appeal of a classic fairy tale.

Author Information

Lyman Frank Baum (May 15, 1856 – May 6, 1919) was an American author of children's books, best known for writing *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. He wrote thirteen novel sequels, nine other fantasy novels, and a host of other works (55 novels in total, plus four "lost" novels, 82 short stories, over 200 poems, an unknown number of scripts, and many miscellaneous writings), and made numerous attempts to bring his works to the stage and screen. His works predicted such century-later commonplaces as television, laptop computers (*The Master Key*), wireless telephones (*Tik-Tok of Oz*), women in high risk, action-heavy occupations (*Mary Louise in the Country*), and the ubiquity of advertising on clothing (*Aunt Jane's Nieces at Work*).

Discussion Questions for The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

1.Almost everyone will know this story, at least in outline, either from having seen the movie or perhaps having it read to them. Describe your first encounter with the tale. Was it through the book or the movie? How was this reading of the story different? Were you surprised that the Land of Oz wasn't over the rainbow, but across a desert? Did you notice any satire or other social comment that escaped you earlier?

2. Setting off on her quest for OZ, and ultimately for Kansas, Dorothy collects three companions, each with a particular shortcoming. How real or important are these deficits? For instance, how are they tested in the dark wood? Why shouldn't the Scarecrow want a heart and the Tin Woodman a brain? Does the Tin Woodman seem smarter that the Scarecrow?

3. The Great Oz has quite a reputation, but are there early hints that it may not be wholly deserved? Did you catch on before Dorothy as to why the green glasses were required in the Emerald City? Does Oz, in his various forms, remind you of any other leaders or rulers in literature or in life? How does your opinion of him change after he is exposed?

4. Wicked witches, wildcats, hammerheads, a giant spider, wolves and crows and killer bees, slavery and black magic, and, of course, the nearly lethal red poppies -- there is clearly a dark side to the Land of Oz. Is this too much for young children? Do you recall being disturbed or frightened by any of this as a child?

5. The Tin Woodman, the Scarecrow, the Cowardly Lion, even the Wizard himself have been changed significantly by events. But what of Dorothy? How much and in what ways has she changed by the time she arrives back in Kansas? She couldn't bring back the silver slippers, but has she brought anything back? What might she have gained or lost?

6. Some readers have seen the story, though written by a man, as an early example of a feminist children's tale featuring a strong, capable, and self-confident little girl who helps the male characters overcome their self doubts and succeed while reaching her own goals as well. Others claim that in returning home, she consigns herself to a dull, uninspiring future on an isolated Kansas farm. What do you think?